

# DIGIDESIGN MBOX2 PRO

The Mbox turns Pro – supporting 96k and flying with Firewire.

Text: Brad Watts



► Another new Mbox from Digidesign? I wouldn't have guessed in a month of Sundays they'd pull this one out of the hat. The Mbox2 Pro is a bigger and better and more boast-worthy proposition than its bandwidth-challenged predecessors. Why? Because it uses a Firewire connection – not the now-eight-years-old Bondi-blue USB 1.1 standard. It's a big step up from 12 to nearly 400Mbps and one that many would suggest should probably have been the Mbox2 protocol in the first place. Regardless, the Mbox2 Pro is here, perhaps even relegating the previous USB model back to the amateur leagues. Which might sound a tad harsh to the many Mbox 'classic' and Mbox 2 owners, but the differences between the 'old' and the Pro are immense.

Pure brown is the immediately noticeable difference. The Mbox2 Pro, while its interface looks very similar to Mbox2, is a much larger unit, such that you could easily rest your laptop on it. Like the handle on its little brother, there's a small off-centre lip that slightly raises the front portion of the unit. As far as I can ascertain, the lip serves no useful function, but it does render the unit slightly less stable when the aforementioned laptop is sitting upon it. (Sadly, the lip cannot be removed like the handle on the Mbox2.)

## INS & OUTS OF CONNECTIVITY

Inputs and outputs are aplenty, which all help accumulate points toward the unit's 'Pro' status. There are, however, a few caveats to be aware of, so it's worth going through the I/O in detail.

Six simultaneous inputs and eight simultaneous outputs provide enough I/O for surround work or getting away with the odd live recording, at a pinch. Be aware that the aforementioned I/O complement includes the coaxial S/PDIF ports, so to gain a full quota you'll need some style of interfacing to the digital I/O. Equally important is the fact the S/PDIF input will only function when the S/PDIF port is nominated as the device's clock source. Meanwhile, the S/PDIF output is always 'on line'. Outputs include four separate ¼-inch balanced outs (the four analogue inputs are also on TRS balanced jacks), with outputs 5 and 6 combined as a single TRS output (obviously not balanced). Outputs 7 and 8 are accessed via the S/PDIF ports.

As an aside: having all these outputs inevitably brings us to the question as to when ProTools LE will finally function in surround. Most programs provide multi-channel panning these days.



Anyway, back to the I/O. A pair of monitor TRS jack outputs are driven via the front panel monitor control and reflect outputs 1 and 2. Of the four analogue inputs, the first two are tripled up as combo jack/XLR inputs at the rear of the box, with DI inputs at the front for high-impedance instrument inputs. A pair of buttons on the front panel instigates the DI inputs. Inputs 3 and 4 also share double duties – serving as TRS jack inputs and a phono input with the appropriate grounding post. Again, a front panel button engages the phono input as inputs 3 and 4. While I'm around the back I should mention that the unit provides a time-stamping MIDI I/O and a footswitch input, which at the moment is non functional – next firmware revision I'd hope. Obviously there's also a pair of six-pin Firewire connectors.

While all this I/O seems ample, please be aware that the maximum number of inputs is only possible when using the S/PDIF input at 44.1 and 48k. External clocking will only support sample-rates up to 48k – and that includes clocking via the wordclock input. So at 88.2 and 96k, the unit is limited to its four analogue inputs only. You see? Not quite 'fully Pro', bro'. Meanwhile, the S/PDIF outputs will operate at 96k so you're assured of eight channels out at all times.

Typically the Mbox 2 Pro arrives with a copy of ProTools LE for both PC and Mac operating systems, along with a version 7.1.3 specifically for Intel-equipped Macs. Installation is an utter doddle, as is plugging the unit in and getting a sound up and happening. (Incidentally, I had no trouble driving the unit via six-pin bus-power, although there is a separate, worldwide power supply if required.) Like most Digidesign releases these days there are a couple of purchasing options. The first being just the bare-bones interface and a copy of ProTools LE, and the second 'Factory Pack' offering a bunch of extra plug-ins; the choice is yours.

### PROPROTOOLS

How's it sound? I was pretty impressed with the quality of the new Pro Mbox. During my time with the unit I auditioned it against three systems: an RME 9632, ProTools HD 96 I/O and the new Apogee Ensemble. The Pro Mbox sounded just dandy to my ears and is more than worthy of the Pro moniker. While I won't go into the specific details and figures, I will point out that the actual specifications far exceed those of the Mbox2 and almost approach the specs of the 002 series. This is a startlingly viable and inexpensive option for those needing to run a portable ProTools rig, all without the hobbling inadequacies of USB. ■



### NEED TO KNOW

**Price**  
\$1235  
\$1385 Factory Edition

**Contact**  
Digidesign  
(02) 9698 9089  
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**Pros**  
Stable and effective Firewire connection protocol.  
Inexpensive ProTools option with enough I/O for more than stereo recording.  
Direct R.I.A.A. phono input.

**Cons**  
Disappointing 1x external clocking.  
Front panel 'lip' makes the unit wobble on your desk.  
Outputs 5 and 6 require purpose-built cable.

**Summary**  
A great option for those needing just that little bit more than what the Mbox2 offers, while still retaining a high degree of portability.